



PICO National Network | *Unlocking the Power of People®*

**Testimony of Rev. Heyward D. Wiggins III
PICO National Network**

Before the Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Energy and Commerce

Hearing: "Living without Health Insurance: Why Every American Needs Coverage"

April 25, 2007

Chairman Pallone, members of the Energy and Commerce Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak about the moral imperative to provide health coverage to the millions in our nation who are uninsured - beginning this year with our most precious resource, our children.

I pastor Camden Bible Tabernacle Church in Camden, New Jersey, a city where more than one-third of families lack health coverage. I have worked over the past decade with Camden Churches Organized for People to revitalize my city. I am proud to be here on behalf of the faith-based PICO National Network. Since 1973 PICO has brought people of faith together to revitalize communities and expand opportunities for families in 150 cities and towns across the country.

A generation ago, the faith community led the Civil Rights Movement. Today, PICO's more than 1,000 congregations and one million families nationwide are a driving force behind the movement to expand health coverage in America, beginning with covering all children. For communities of faith, the force behind both movements is the same. God created each of us in his image. We have a sacred responsibility to protect the dignity and well being of every person.

Two weeks ago the New Jersey State Police airlifted Governor Jon Corzine to Cooper University Hospital in my city of Camden. Cooper is a level-one trauma center that fights as hard to save a young person shot on the streets of Camden as it does to heal a governor. Like Jesus, our trauma centers open their arms to the poor and the forgotten. The value that our hospitals place on every person's life as sacred – whether they be a poor child, a drug dealer, a prostitute or a public official - is a fundamental cornerstone of our society. It has deep roots in our religious traditions, in the teachings of Moses, Jesus and Mohammed. None of us in this room would wish to live in a nation that did not value every person as a child of God.

Yet, when it comes to the uninsured we have lost our moral compass. We have deceived ourselves that a slow death is no death. The National Academy of Sciences estimates that 18,000 people, adults and children, die prematurely each year because they lack health coverage. Hundreds of thousands more face unnecessary pain and suffering. Go to the Cooper Hospital Emergency room. You will see hundreds of people waiting all day to see a doctor. They come too late, they wait too long and they pray that in the end charity care will cover the cost. Yet it is society that ultimately pays the price when we deny people the health coverage they need to keep themselves and their families healthy.

When people have reliable health coverage for their children and themselves they have the tools to build strong healthy families and communities. Access to health care is a conduit to a vibrant and productive society. Indeed, we have a moral and constitutional obligation that the founders of our country thought important enough to include as part of our inalienable rights, to protect the right to the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness. Today, the reality is that we are not all able to pursue our

dreams and our vocations because our society does not have a viable system to heal all its people. We join with the prophet Jeremiah who asked, "Is there no Balm in Gilead?" Is there no way for us to get healing in this land?

PICO's faith-based federations and congregations have led many different efforts to cover the uninsured and improve health conditions in our communities. For example,

- We've helped establish mobile health-care clinics that visit public housing complexes and low-income communities in Orlando, FL and other cities
- We've fought for and won increased funding for safety net clinics and coverage for the uninsured in California, Colorado, Virginia and other states.
- We've worked to pass Tobacco Tax measures to provide care for the uninsured in Missouri and California

These efforts and other efforts to protect the uninsured are important. The health care system is broken and increasingly out of reach of too many families. It can only be fixed with participation from the faith community, business and civic leaders and local and state government. We find hope in the creativity of local initiatives on the uninsured. But our nation cannot succeed, cannot live up to our promise, without strong and determined health care leadership from Washington.

For the faith community it is unacceptable that a nation as wealthy as ours would leave 44 million Americans uninsured. As we work to find resources to cover the uninsured, which must be a high priority for Congress, our nation needs to invest more in prevention. We must be good stewards of our resources, so that people get early intervention that prevents expensive treatment down the line.

As Congress works to expand coverage for the uninsured we urge you to build on the success of existing programs and initiatives. This year PICO and the broader faith community have united behind an effort to strengthen and expand the State Children's Health Insurance Program to help states cover uninsured children.

We begin with our young people because they are our future and because we have a chance this year to get results. No child should rely on an emergency room for their treatment or run the risk of life-long disability because they lack health insurance. With help from SCHIP we have reduced the number of uninsured children by one-third; but morally we cannot abide with having millions of children without health coverage in the United States; we cannot abide with rising infant mortality rates; we must start by making certain that every child has health coverage and access to high quality medical attention.

That is why PICO has engaged in the SCHIP reauthorization debate since it began, testifying before this committee and engaging hundreds of clergy in a united stand on covering uninsured children. We continue to urge Congress to move quickly to deliver on its' commitment of \$50 billion in additional resources for SCHIP reauthorization. We urge Congress to strengthen SCHIP by giving financial incentives and support to encourage states to reach and retain all eligible children. And we support giving states the option to cover pregnant women and documented immigrant children and continue to support state efforts to expand eligibility. We will be working closely with Congress – and keeping a close eye on Congress – over the next three months to ensure passage of a good SCHIP bill that strengthens children, strengthens families, and strengthens communities.

While our policy focus this year is on SCHIP reauthorization and children's coverage, our faith communities will remain engaged in this issue until everyone has access to affordable health coverage. After all, we are all children of God, regardless of our age.

With your commitment the movement to cover the uninsured, beginning with children, will not be deterred. Together we will make this the healthiest, most successful generation in American history. We will see a day when every person has access to good health, when all of God's children – young and old – can travel from coast to coast and not be concerned with having an unplanned health crisis and perishing because they cannot get treated in the land of the free and the home of the brave. The song writer said it this way, *My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing; land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims' pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring!*

Thank you all for listening.

Rev. Heyward D. Wiggins III
PICO National Network
Camden Churches Organized for People
2770 Federal Street
PO Box 1317
Camden, NJ 08105
www.piconetwork.org